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## **THE BREADTH, FREENESS, AND Yet Exclusiveness of the Gospel.**

BY THE  
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### **THE BREADTH, FREENESS, AND YET EXCLUSIVENESS OF THE GOSPEL. JOHN III. 16.**

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THE subject has, I presume, been chosen for our discussion, in order to meet the aspersions of those who claim for their own system the merit of breadth, comprehensiveness, and large-heartedness, while they speak of our Gospel as the narrow-minded theology of a body of men whose contracted intellects are so cramped and stunted that they are unable to take in the broad views of the nineteenth century. Such persons consider themselves broad, and us narrow; and their teaching to be characterized by largeness, ours by narrowness; theirs by generosity, ours by bigotry; theirs by comprehensive philanthropy, ours by an exclusive interest in a small section of the human family.

Now there is something very noble in broad, large, and comprehensive views of the dealings and character of God, and something, on the other hand, exceedingly repulsive in any disposition to contract God's message, or to half close the door which God has opened wide for the world. And, more than that, there is something so grand in the magnificence of creation, that we cannot be

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surprised if our judgment naturally decides in favour of that which claims to be the broader view of the religious government of God. We fully acknowledge therefore the attractiveness and persuasiveness of breadth, and are fully prepared to admit that the broad has much more to commend it than the narrow, and that the probability of truth lies on the side of the broadest, the widest, the freest message.

But, while freely admitting that the broadest statement of the Gospel is most probably the truest, we have yet to decide the question, which statement is really the broadest, and on which side is the narrowness to be found? and if this question be fairly considered, it may possibly turn out that that which calls itself the broad is really the narrow, and that which some men call narrow is possessed of a breadth, and length, and depth, and height, that can only be measured by the infinity of God. It is well therefore to consider whether the Gospel, as revealed in Scripture, is really broad or really narrow,—applying the tests of breadth and fulness to the message of salvation as proclaimed in the Gospel of the grace of God.

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### I. *Its breadth.*

Is there in all language, a wider, broader, fuller, and more comprehensive statement, than is found in the words of our blessed Redeemer,—“God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life”? It describes a Divine and eternal love, originating a salvation unmerited, unlooked for, and as far above all human thoughts as heaven is above the earth. It declares the object of it to be the world, the whole world, and nothing short of the world; for it is just as unreasonable to maintain that the world in this verse means the elect, as it would be to maintain that “the elect of God,” in Col. iii., means the world. It proclaims the most magnificent possible offer as the result of it. God forbid that we should ever cramp, fetter, or limit it! It is the New Testament exposition of the Old Testament invitation,—“Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters,” and it is the foundation of the message heard from heaven,—“The Spirit and the Bride say, Come: and let him that heareth say, Come: and let him that is athirst come: and whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.” Our Lord’s words on earth are one with His words in heaven, and both proclaim an unqualified invitation to all, without the exclusion of an individual. The invitation is as broad as the world itself, and there is no man, woman, or child under the whole heaven, to whom God, in His unbounded mercy, has not sent the gracious message of free and complete salvation.

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If we look more closely at the details, we find that the glad tidings are not limited,—

#### 1. *By nationality.*

When Wilberforce pleaded in the House of Commons for the admission of missionaries to India, it was argued that the Gospel was not adapted to the Indian mind, and that it was not in the nature of things that Hindoos should be converted to God. So persons, laying claim to great anthropological wisdom, appear to regard the Gospel as something never meant for the African. But there is no limitation in Scripture. African, Indian, American, New Zealander, are all alike included in the message as found there. The Jew of old believed that it was only for the Jews, and some English in modern times seem to regard it as intended only for the European. But the Word of God says it is for *all*; experience proves it to be for *all*; and the comparatively recent missionary efforts of the Church of Christ have been sufficient to prove that climate makes no difference as to faith; and, whether it be under a tropical sun, or in an arctic frost, the knowledge of Christ is followed up by the same results,—the same change of heart, the same love, the same fruits of the Spirit, the same joy and peace in believing, and the same blessed hope to fill the soul in the dying hour. Our missionary spirit therefore should be wide as the world; and those who boast of the superior broadness of their principles, ought to lead the way in a large-hearted effort to follow up the directions of their Saviour:—“Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature.”

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#### 2. *It is not limited by ecclesiastical order.*

God forbid that I should say one word that should appear for one moment to make light of Christian order, for I believe it to be a subject far too much forgotten by devoted men in the present day. Evangelical zeal is considered by some to have full license to override all authority, and break through every regulation. There are many excellent, zealous, faithful, and fervent spirits, who are contending manfully for the inspiration of the whole of Scripture, but who appear completely to ignore such words as those by St. Paul, in 1 Thess. v. 12, 13. I believe therefore, that it is one of the special duties of the day to urge devoted Christians to investigate what Scripture says of order. But, however important it be, we must still remember that the glad tidings of the Gospel are not limited to any order or any system whatever. Our episcopacy is gathered from facts recorded in Scripture, but is never established by the authority of a command. We adopt it because we believe it to be in harmony with Apostolic practice as revealed in Scripture; but we dare not pronounce it an essential: for it is not so pronounced in Scripture. There is not one word there to lead us to suppose that episcopacy is like one great conduit pipe, through which alone grace can flow. The blessed message is not limited to any one channel. The Holy Spirit is free as the winds of heaven; and it is perfectly clear that God, in saving souls, has not tied Himself down to the employment of any particular Church organization. As the message is sent to all men, in all countries, and under all circumstances, so also is it conveyed through all kinds of instrumentalities;—Episcopalian and Nonconformist,—

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ordained and unordained,—Churchmen, Dissenters, Presbyterians,—Churches at home and Churches abroad,—teachers, preachers, pastors and evangelists; for there is a breadth in the agency as well as in the sphere of action, and the same Lord over all, who is rich unto all that call upon Him, is rich also unto all who labour for His Name.

3. Once more: there is no *doctrinal limitation*.

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I presume that we are perfectly agreed as to the Scriptural truth,—that our salvation in Christ Jesus is to be ascribed entirely to the Father's electing love. We know that it was not our fallen, ruined, sin-corrupted will which chose Him, but His own boundless grace which chose us to life. In other words, we know that salvation is the result of God's election, and we believe in the words of our Lord,—“No man can come to Me except the Father which hath sent Me draw him.” But we have all probably felt, at some time or other, the difficulty of reconciling such a fact with the free offer of life to all. It is not unnatural that men should argue, that if the elect alone are saved, to them alone must the salvation be offered. I am not prepared to find any fault with the logical process which leads to this conclusion, for I fully admit that to my own mind the logic seems correct; but God's eternal counsels rise high above all human logic, and there are deep mysteries in His infinite mind, which we finite thinkers are utterly unable to unravel. So it is in this instance. Our logic breaks down, but His Word stands fast; and that Word teaches us that God's election does not neutralize the free offer, any more than the Godhead of the Lord Jesus Christ neutralized His Manhood. How it is we cannot explain, any more than we can the union of two natures in the one Person of our Blessed Saviour. But, thanks be to God, we find in Scripture the universal offer side by side with electing love; so that, accepting Scripture as we find it, we learn that election does not narrow the breadth of the offer, or take away its universality. It does not blot out the “whosoever” from the words of our Saviour. It does not contract the glad tidings; but it leaves the Gospel perfectly open to every man, without qualification, without limitation, and without the necessity of any evidence of election to precede a trust in the Lord Jesus for pardon, life, and immortality.

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II. But we must pass on to the *freeness*. For there might be an offer made to every one, but yet on such terms that no one could accept it; and so would this have been, had God required that there should be one act of sinless obedience on our part, as a preliminary qualification to our being saved in Christ Jesus. The person who is possessed of nothing is as little able to pay one pound as a hundred; and the ruined man, dead in sin, is as little able to produce one act of life as a hundred. So long as he is dead he can produce nothing; for he is not only without God, but also without strength. Oh, the depth of the riches of the tender lovingkindness of our God! Oh, the wonders of that grace that does not wait till the sinner can produce a something, however small that something be; but freely, and graciously, and mercifully, and lovingly, bestows a free, full, perfect, complete, and everlasting reconciliation on the poor ruined sinner, even at the very time of his utter ruin! I do not pretend to know all the various religious systems of the world; but this I can most safely say,—that I never yet heard of anything but the blessed Gospel of the grace of God, which proclaims reconciliation to men without a claim, and at the very time that they are without a claim. In every other system the order is amendment first, and forgiveness second: but in the Gospel the order is reversed, and we find the forgiveness first, as a free gift, while the amendment follows, as the blessed fruit of the Spirit in a repentant and loving heart. The language of Scripture is not what any natural moralist would have written,—“There is forgiveness with Thee if I can but fear Thee sufficiently:” but God reverses the order, so that those who cannot, for one moment, stand before Him, are taught to say,—“There is forgiveness with Thee that Thou mayest be feared.” I should like to know from those who boast of the superior benevolence of their system, what that system does for the helpless,—for the man whose soul is paralyzed, and whose power to rise is gone, being deadened by his sin. I fearlessly ask the advocate of mere natural religion, what the religion of nature can do for such an one. His moral sense may teach him his duty, and his conscience may bring him in guilty of not having fulfilled that duty; but what does natural religion do to reinstate and restore him? Our Gospel proclaims to him pardon, and our Saviour gives him life, even at the time of the deepest ruin. But what does nature do for him? What does conscience do to restore him? It leaves him condemned, ruined, sunk, and helpless; and holds out to him nothing better than the hope, that when he has got out of the pit, he may find mercy through the benevolence of God. If that were the Gospel, it would be glad tidings to those only who have already recovered themselves from their ruin. The Lord Jesus would be a Saviour for only such as do not need one. It would be a promise of life to those only who have already raised themselves from death; but it would be a sentence of everlasting exclusion against all those who have failed as often as we have done, and have had to learn from bitter experience the sad lesson of their utter helplessness. But, praised be God, the whole ransom has been paid, the whole claim of the law satisfied, the utmost depth of ruin fully provided for; so that now there is life in the midst of death, and full, complete, and final reconciliation presented to the sinner, at the very time when he is lost in his fall. Did the world ever produce an offer so free? and was there ever yet a religious system in the world which presented such a salvation, on such terms, to the sinner?

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III. But still there is an *exclusiveness* in the Gospel.

Let us however clearly understand, when we speak of exclusiveness, that we do not mean exclusiveness in the glad tidings, for, as already shown, these glad tidings are freely sent to every man; but what we do mean is,—that Christ Jesus is the only Saviour, and that “there is none other

name under heaven, given amongst men, whereby we must be saved." We do mean that God has not promised salvation through a conscientious devotion to Buddha, or Vishnu, or Mahommed, or reason, or the light of nature; but that God, in giving Christ as our life, gave Him as the only Source of life, and not as one amongst many Saviours.

Now this exclusiveness appears to be the necessary consequence of the breadth and freedom of the offer; and had I had the framing of the thesis, I should have preferred to have stated it as "The breadth, freeness, and *consequent* exclusiveness of the Gospel:" for if we consider the great origin of the Gospel,—the eternal love of God; the marvellous plan of the Gospel,—the sacrifice of the Son of God; the boundless mercy of the Gospel,—as seen in the offering such a salvation to every poor sinner under heaven; and the unutterable grace of the Gospel,—in offering it freely to poor sinners, at the very time that those sinners are hopelessly sunk in the ruin of their sin;—it does appear to be an act of the deepest presumption for men to suppose that there may be other ways through which men can be saved, other systems through which men can be restored. If men could be saved any other way, why did the Lord Jesus come? why did He die? If self-denying idolatry or conscientious morality were sufficient, why was there any Gospel at all? and why were we not left to win our way to eternal life, by morality and heathenism in all their varied forms? If the Gospel be regarded as a Divine remedy for the sinner, then surely it must be exclusive. If this be God's plan, then surely a plan from God was needful, and no human plan was sufficient. If it were a human plan, then I could perfectly understand that other human plans might be equally effectual,—or, I should rather say, equally fruitless; but if it be really God's plan, then it must stand alone as the only way of restoration to life.

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The only possible way of meeting this view of the subject is, by supposing that the result of our Lord's propitiation is applied, without their knowledge, to those who do not believe in His Name. Of course if this were God's plan, we should have nothing to say, and our simple duty would be to accept it with thanksgiving. But on this point we must be wholly dependent on God's own statement of His own counsel. When we are studying God's purpose, our only hope of arriving at truth is by simple dependence on what God has revealed to us in His Word; and not the smallest reliance can be placed on any conclusions which we may draw from what we think most probable in so benevolent a God. Of course if men do not believe in Scripture, as inspired by the Spirit, this evidence fails them; but then they have nothing to assure them that there is any Gospel at all. But if we admit it to be God's plan, then from God we must learn its character, and His Word alone must guide our decision. Now it is needless for me to multiply passages, as I might do to almost any extent, to show that in God's Word we are taught, that the blessings of our Lord's work are not bestowed except through faith in His Name. Whatever conclusions men may derive from their own ideas of Divine benevolence, there cannot be a question that this is the testimony of Scripture. If men place greater reliance on their own opinion of what they think God ought to have done, than on what God Himself declares He has done, we can only say, as St. Paul did,—"Nay! but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?" In such a matter we are entirely limited by the Divine statements, and man's opinion is utterly worthless; for the counsels of God, in their very nature, lie quite beyond the limits of human enquiry. If we do not believe in the words of our blessed Saviour, we have not the slightest evidence of any salvation at all; and if we do believe them, we must believe them all, and must accept without hesitation His own most solemn statement, the most exclusive sentence which I know in the whole range of Christian theology,—"He that believeth, and is baptized, shall be saved; and he that believeth not shall be damned."

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